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CHRISTIAN UNION.

A DISCOURSE

DELIVERED IN THE

MARKET SQUARE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,

GERMANTOWN, PA.,

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DISCOURSE.

'EPHRAIM SHALL NOT ENVY JUDAH, AND JUDAH SHALL NOT VEX EPHRAIM."
Isaiah xi. 13.

EPHRAIM and Judah comprehended the entire body of the Hebrew nation—Ephraim including the kingdom of Israel, or the ten tribes, and Judah the remaining tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The names are given to these two kingdoms from the prominence of the tribes of Ephraim and Judah in their respective divisions.

Between these two kingdoms there long existed the most hostile feelings. "Ephraim envied Judah, and Judah vexed Ephraim." "The tribe of Ephraim, in connection with those which were allied to it, constituted a very large and flourishing part of the Jewish nation. They were, therefore, envious of any other tribe that claimed any superiority, and particularly jealous of Judah. They occupied a central and commanding position in Judea, and naturally claimed the pre-eminence over the tribes on the north. They had been formerly highly favored by the abode of the ark and tabernacle among them, and on that account claimed to be the natural *head* of the nation. When Saul was king, though he was of the tribe of Benjamin, they submitted peaceably to his reign, because the Benjaminites were

in alliance with them, and adjacent to them. But when Saul died, and the kingdom passed into the hands of David, of the tribe of Judah, their natural rival, thus exalting that powerful tribe, they became dissatisfied and restless. David kept the nation united; but on his death they threw off the yoke of his successor, and became a separate kingdom. From this time their enmities, and envies, and animosities, and strifes became an important and painful part of the history of the Jewish nation, until the kingdom of Ephraim was removed, and the ten tribes were lost by being mingled with other nations."

Our text has evident reference to gospel times. It points to a period when contentions in the church shall cease; when not only the various tribes of Jews shall be gathered under one Messiah and Prince, but the whole family of Christ shall be united in the most delightful harmony and fellowship.

Such a period the predictions and promises of the Bible fully authorize us to expect. "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf, and young lion, and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice den;" the most ferocious and venomous animals thus living in peace with those which are the most weak and defenceless.

This universal harmony which is ultimately to prevail under Messiah's reign, is thus beautifully described by Pope:—

"The Lamb with wolves shall graze the verdant mead,
And boys in flowery bands the Tigers lead;
The Steer and Lion at one crib shall meet,
And harmless serpents lick the pilgrim's feet;
The smiling infant in his hands shall take,
The crested Basilisk and speckled snake;
Pleased the green lustre of the scales survey,
And with their forked tongues shall innocently play."

In that day, we are assured, "the Lord shall be King over all the earth, and there shall be one Lord, and his name one." "I will give them one heart and one way." "Thy watchman shall lift up the voice, with the voice together shall they sing; for they shall see eye to eye, when the Lord shall bring again Zion."

It was the prayer of the Son of God that his people might be *one*, even as he and the Father are one. That prayer is no doubt yet to receive its full accomplishment. All true Christians are now *essentially* one, but they are not always so in appearance and name. We anticipate a union that will be as visible as it is real. What will be the peculiar type or aspect of the church during this happy era, we can hardly venture to say. Certain it is, however, that there is to be a state of Christian Union transcending any thing that has yet been found in the Church of Christ. Not only shall there be one Shepherd, but one fold. The jarring denominational or sectarian interests, which at present too often alienate the friends of Zion, shall cease. Their hearts will be cemented in the most endearing fellowship; they will acknowledge each other as members of the same great family; and as they have one common Father and Saviour, so will they also have but one common cause and interest.

The special object of this discourse will be *to show how this state of Christian Union may be effected.*

I. First of all there must be *a fuller conviction of the evils of disunion, accompanied with mutual confessions and deep humiliation.* For the divisions of Zion there should be great searchings of heart. Such divisions began very early to develop themselves in the Christian Church. Some manifested an undue partiality for Paul, others for Apollos, and others for Cephas. Here is that very spirit of sect which has since riven the Church into fragments, and arraigned Christian brethren against each other, who have substantially "one Lord, one faith, one baptism." And to what does the Apostle attribute this favoritism among the Corinthians—to their piety or to their depravity? Does he commend or does he rebuke it? Let us hear his own language: "Whereas there is among you envying and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos, are ye not carnal?" Here is no attempt to justify these divisions. On the other hand they are denounced in the most unqualified manner, as savoring not of the spirit but of the flesh. They have their origin not in Christianity, but in human pride and selfishness; and therefore must certainly admit of a remedy. God may *overrule* the existence of different religious denominations for good, just as he may overrule any other evil; but that certainly affords no apology for the evil itself.

The Church of God is one. It is spoken of in the Scriptures as one household—one community—one flock—one edifice—one army. "Feed *the Church* of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." "Christ loved *the Church*, and gave himself for it."

And as the Church of God is one *in fact*, so should it

be one *in appearance—visibly* as well as *really* one. Not that it should be united under one visible head—whether Pope or sovereign—for the Scriptures acknowledge no other head than Christ himself; bnt we mean to say, that whatever may be the particular organization which the different branches of the Christian Church may assume, they should be presented to the world as one body, united by a common faith, by common ties, and by common interests.

Notwithstanding the peculiarities that may distinguish the followers of Christ from each other, it should be clearly seen, that they constitute but one brotherhood, adopting the same great principles of evangelical truth, and devoted to the same noble design—the redemption of a world from sin and misery.

Hitherto there has been too much disposition to *justify* the divisions of the Christian Church. Such divisions, in consequence of certain supposed advantages that may have resulted from them, have been regarded rather as desirable than as otherwise—our glory rather than our shame. But what the Bible condemns, let us beware how we vindicate. What God has joined together, let no man put asunder. Until we are convinced of our sin, we shall never be brought to true repentance. Each denomination must admit the possibility of holding to some form of error, which it may be required to repudiate. None must regard itself as infallible—none indulge the vain hope that the ultimate union of the Church will be a union to them. Admitting that some of our evangelical denominations entertain more correct and comprehensive views of divine truth than others, there may still be connected with all something defective and wrong—something that they may be called to

abandon, or at least greatly to modify. No form of Christianity, as it now exists, can claim absolute perfection, any more than individual Christians can urge that claim. "One side," says Dr. Emmons, "are apt to imagine that those who differ from them, have no Scripture nor reason on their side, but are altogether governed by an improper spirit in forming their opinions on religious subjects. But if they would freely examine each other's peculiar sentiments, they would probably find that those who differ from them, have sometimes been as laborious, impartial, and judicious, in searching after truth, as they have been, and have approached nearer to it in some points than they have done. There is no ground to suppose that any one denomination of Christians, nor any individuals in any one denomination, have engrossed all truth, and renounced all error."

II. This leads me now to remark: another thing that will greatly tend to facilitate the union of Christians, is *the cultivation of a better spirit in the discussion of theological subjects.*

If there are *disputings*, there will be no "*perverse* disputings." At present many of the controversies of Christians savor of any thing rather than of the spirit of the Gospel, and weapons any thing rather than spiritual have been resorted to for the defence and propagation of the truth. The grand aim has been, not the triumph of *truth*, but the triumph of *sect*. Under the idea of contending *earnestly* for the faith, many have even contended *passionately*. The views of opponents have been misrepresented, their characters traduced, and an unhallowed, if not malignant, satisfaction has been felt in any advantage that has been gained in the contest. The effect of this has been not to *convince*, but to *irritate*;

not to *attract,* but to *repel.* Christians, instead of being brought to a closer union, have been placed wider apart.

Now the evil is, not disputation itself, but the spirit with which it has been conducted. Investigation, or, if you please, controversy, there will and must be. It is thus that error is detected, and truth elicited; but the motto of Christians must be not *light* merely, but *light and love;* not *purity* merely, but *purity and peace.* Let us first see that the points we hold are worth contending for, and then be careful with what spirit we carry on the contest. "The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God."

I am a Calvinist, you are an Arminian; still let us not "fall out by the way." The system which I have adopted, I regard as the most consistent and harmonious. I think that you might be materially benefited by embracing it. I believe you are in an error, and I may feel it my duty to convince you of the fact; yet I will not attempt it by calling hard names. I will not misrepresent your views. So far as I understand them, I will state them just as they are held by yourself, nor will I resort to any other means than those that are truly honest and Christian, to bring you over to my side. As I feel and act toward you, I shall expect you to feel and act toward me. The points of difference between us may be deemed important, but they certainly cannot be deemed essential. They should not, therefore, for a moment, interrupt our Christian intercourse and fellowship. I regard you as a brother beloved in the Lord. I see in you the image of the Master, and I find that he is setting his seal to your labors no less than to my own. Let us make all allowance for the prejudice of education, the influence under which our

respective views have been formed, and the phraseology we may adopt. Instead of laboring to find out how far we are apart, let us see how near we come together; and while our hearts glow with love to the same Saviour, let us unite our energies in the same cause, sympathizing with each other's trials, rejoicing in each other's prosperity, and looking forward with delightful anticipation to the period when all our present differences shall be reconciled, and we shall unitedly ascribe our salvation to the blood of the same redeeming Saviour.

Whitefield was once asked by a censorious professor whether he thought they would see John Wesley in heaven? "No, sir," was the reply, "I fear not; for he will be so near the throne, and we shall be at such a distance, we shall hardly get sight of him." The language was truly characteristic of the noble disinterestedness of that distinguished man. "Let the name of Georgé Whitefield," said he, "perish, if God be glorified."

III. As the present dissentions in Zion grow out of human imperfection, we can expect those dissentions to be healed *only by a more enlightened and elevated piety.* "From whence come wars and fightings among you? Come they not hence, even of your lusts, that war in your members?" This is as true of contests in the church as it is of contests in the world. All sectarianism may be traced to human pride and selfishness. The proper remedy for the evil, therefore, is to be found in a higher state of spiritual attainment. An increase of piety would, of course, include an increase of humility and benevolence. Its tendency would be to check the desire for pre-eminence, and lead us to esteem others better than ourselves. It would incline us to regard the

opinions of others with candor, and correct what may be erroneous in our own. There is no pride that is marked with greater obstinacy than the pride of opinion. It is no uncommon thing when men have once committed themselves in favor of certain views, to maintain them with the utmost pertinacity, even when convinced that they are wrong, or, at least, of far less importance than they had supposed them to be.

Grace alone can cure this deeply seated evil of our fallen nature. True piety renders us teachable, willing to be corrected, and disposed to receive the truth, from whatever source it may come. It finds far more gratification in witnessing the general prosperity of Zion, than in the triumph of the distinctive principles of any particular denomination. It aims not at victory, but at truth; not at personal aggrandizement, but at the honor of God. It loves what God loves, seeks what God seeks, and rejoices in what God rejoices. Wherever it discovers the spirit of Christ, there the heart flows forth in the purest and warmest affection.

What the church then needs, most of all, is a new baptism of the Holy Spirit,—the baptism of *love*. "The way to *think* alike, is first to *feel* alike. Nothing tends more to make people of one mind, than being of one heart. If they feel heart to heart, they will be apt to see eye to eye." In times of special religious interest, there is commonly but little difficulty in promoting Christian union among the various evangelical denominations. It is only when the work of grace begins to decline, that they begin to think of the spoils, and the desire to proselyte to themselves, preponderates over their desire to win souls to the Master. The late Dr. Johns, of Baltimore, speaking of "excessive denomi-

nationalism," remarks, "wherever this goes beyond love for souls, something is wrong. So fearful am I of this spirit, that I have been accustomed for years, in passing a house of worship of some other denomination than my own, to lift my heart to God, in prayer for that minister and his people."

IV. The union of the church will also be promoted by *increased light.*

Doctrines and practices which are now matters of dispute, may yet be so clearly elucidated as to bring the church to a most remarkable unity in the faith,—a unity founded not on indifference, but on truth. Much that is now dark will be made plain; the principles of biblical interpretation will be more fully settled; prophecy will be unfolded, and disputed texts satisfactorily interpreted.

Each denomination regards itself, at present, as holding the system of divine truth in its greatest purity, and yet there may be in all, much that comes under what the apostle calls "wood, hay, and stubble." The time will yet come that will try every man's faith, as well as every man's work. The church is very far from having attained to its highest state, either in knowledge or piety. We may calculate on a continual augmentation of both, until the glory of the perfect day. "Every principle, every institution, every practice, every usage, is yet to be tried by 'the law and the testimony.'" Men may tenaciously hold on to their peculiarities, but God will yet show the utter fallacy and uselessness of many of our dogmas, and make us ashamed of our former bickerings and jealousies. He will overturn, and overturn, and overturn, until truth and righteousness shall prevail throughout the entire earth. "The light of the moon

shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun seven fold." "The watchmen shall see eye to eye, and shall lift up the voice together." All, with one mind, and one mouth, shall worship and glorify God.

V. Again: Christian Union should not be expected on the ground of *entire unanimity of sentiment.* It is a melancholy fact, that most of the controversies that have disgraced the Christian name have related to points of mere secondary consideration. Men who have been united in all things essential to Christian character and Christian fellowship, have wasted their time and talents in the fruitless attempt to make each other think alike. We are told of two states in Italy that carried on a twenty years' war for a *bucket!* It was not because they really valued the bucket, but the contest having commenced, the phrenzied excitement spread, and each party became fully resolved on victory. Many of the controversies that have prevailed among the professed followers of the Saviour can scarcely be regarded as of much greater consequence. Among the numerous sects that may be found in our land, there is one through which the ploughshare of division has been driven on account of a difference of opinion respecting their garments—one party insisting on wearing a coat of a certain shape, the other a coat of a different cut—one contending that buttons are both lawful and serviceable; the other denouncing their use as an unpardonable sin!

A most remarkable illustration of this contracted spirit is furnished in the case of the Ephraimites at the passages of Jordan. The Gileadites having taken possession of those passages before the Ephraimites, and having artfully devised to distinguish them by their provincial pronunciation of the Hebrew *Shibboleth*, thus

slew great numbers by that stratagem. We read "that when those Ephraimites which were escaped said, let me go over, that the men of Gilead said unto him, art thou an Ephraimite? If he said nay, then said they unto him, say now *Shib*boleth, and he said *Sib*boleth, for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then took they him and slew him at the passages of Jordan." Judges xii. 5, 6.

The difference in the words in the original is in the first letter. In one it is *Sheen* or sh, in the other *Samech*, or s. Thus by using s, instead of sh, in a word intended to express the same thing—namely, a river, or stream of water—the poor Ephraimite lost his life.

So in the Church of God, one says *Shib*boleth, another *Sib*boleth; and though both may intend the same thing, a little difference, often as unimportant as a single letter, will lead those to regard each other as strangers, and even as enemies, who should esteem each other as friends.

When will men cease to be children? Why not allow our fellow-Christians the same liberty that we claim for ourselves? The points on which we agree are certainly of far greater moment than those on which we differ. Let the latter be fully investigated, but let us see that we do not give them undue prominence. "In essentials," says Melancthon, "unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, chariy."

Diversity of views, both in regard to certain points of doctrine and practice, there always has been, and, in the present state of imperfection, there always will be. Even in the Apostolic Churches there appears not to have been entire unanimity of sentiment. Some regarded certain Jewish rites and festivals as still obligatory;

others, who better understood the liberty wherewith Christ had made them free, maintained that they were entirely abolished. Some thought it lawful to eat certain meats; others condemned their use as criminal. What then? Were the churches, on that account, permitted to divide themselves into different factions, and arraign themselves under different leaders? "Him that is weak in the faith," said the Apostle, "receive ye, but not to doubtful disputation." "We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves."

The points of disagreement in the primitive church appear to have been of far more importance than those which often divide Christians at the present day, and yet the Apostle, instead of encouraging anything like separation, or even coldness, exhorts to mutual charity and forbearance. Schism is allowable only where there is a denial of *essential* truth—the truth as it is in Jesus.

It is perfect folly to expect that all men will think alike on the subject of religion. They can no more be made to think alike than they can be made to look alike. Even during the Millenium there will probably exist an honest difference of opinion in reference to matters not absolutely essential.

While each denomination may, under existing circumstances, be permitted to retain its present organization, and maintain in every proper way its own peculiarities, we would suggest whether it may not yet be practicable to adopt a creed including all the essential principles of the Gospel, as the common bond of union between the followers of the Saviour. This suggestion is made in view of the fact, that on all fundamental points, there exists between those who, in the judgment

of charity, are true Christians, an entire unanimity. Find them where you may, they have all substantially the same views of human depravity and guilt—of the Saviour's divinity and atonement—of justification by faith—of regeneration by the Spirit, and of a state of future and eternal retribution. Here then is a platform on which we may all meet; and by an open declaration of our faith in these great and cardinal truths, show to the world, that in the midst of variety, there may still be substantial unity. Something of this kind, we know, has already been attempted by the "Evangelical Alliance;" and whatever may be our opinion as to the results of that movement, or the human infirmities by which it may have been marred, the spirit from which it originated was evidently from above, and should be hailed as the harbinger of millenial peace and glory. In the great work of bringing the scattered tribes of Israel to a closer union, we should not fail nor be discouraged. What ought to be done can be done. If one effort prove a failure, the next may be crowned with glorious success.

VI. In our efforts to promote Christian union we should remember that such union should be founded solely on *the exhibition of Christian character*. It should grow out of our conformity to Christ, and not out of any peculiarity of sentiment or mode of worship. Such was the ground on which was based the union of the primitive Christians. They loved each other because they were beloved by Christ. They received each other because they were received by Christ. We have no right to demand anything as indispensable to Christian fellowship which is not indispensable to fellowship with Christ. Union to the Head constitutes the sole and proper ground of union among the members.

It may indeed be a question what constitutes credible evidence of Christian character. On this point we have only to remark, that while we ought not to be satisfied with *too little*, we ought not to demand *too much*. Charity should ever incline us to the most favorable judgment. Where an individual exhibits prevailing evidence of piety, the hand of fellowship should be extended to him, even though our confidence may be mingled with misgivings. Wherever men hold to the great and fundamental principles of Christianity, and furnish evidence that those principles exert a sanctifying influence on the heart and life, there is laid the foundation for Christian love and fellowship. We may regard the creed of our brother as defective, and, in some respects, even as erroneous; yet if he yields a cordial assent to those doctrines which, according to the general sentiment of the Christian church, form the basis of the Christian system, and at the same time bears the marks of sincere devotion to Christ, he is fully entitled to our confidence and affection. "The man who is good enough for Christ," says Robert Hall, "is good enough for me."

The confession of faith required of the primitive converts, was at once brief and simple. "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus Christ, and shalt believe in thy heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved." "See here is water," said the eunuch, "what doth hinder me to be baptized?" And Philip said, "if thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God."

The views of the early Christians, as to what they regarded essential to salvation and Christian fellowship, may be learned from the so-called Apostle's Creed, and

also from the Nicene Creed,—both embodying only those great truths of Christianity which distinguish it from all other systems, and on which is suspended the redemption of man.

VII. *Ecclesiastical* union, I now remark, should be based on *Christian* union. There ought to be no terms of church fellowship, which are not also terms of salvation or of Christian fellowship. Whatever is not essential to the one, should not be considered essential to the other. It is the disparagement and violation of this important principle that constitutes the grand cause of those divisions and alienations which have so unhappily distracted the Christian church. Thus we have denominations who, while they may cordially extend to their brethren in Christ the hand of *Christian* fellowship, debar them at the same time from all *ecclesiastical* fellowship. We may freely associate, as members of the redeemed family of Christ, but we must not sit together at the table of Christ! We may meet on the platform, and in the general prayer-meeting, but by no means in the pulpit!

Thus have good men often done violence to their own better judgment and feelings, and placed barriers in the way of Christian and ministerial intercourse, contrary to every principle of truth, justice, and benevolence. "Not for the world would I hold a pulpit which I could not throw open to any man of any name, of whom I believed that he truly uttered the Gospel of Christ. Not for the world would I stand in fellowship with a particular church which excludes any other believer from its fellowship. Let all the saints determine to receive all whom Christ has received; to love all whom Christ loves; to commune with all who dwell in the communion of the Holy Spirit."

We advocate no violent measures for the promotion of Christian or ecclesiastical union. The movement must be spontaneous and cordial. A forced union would be no union at all. It is better to bear a while with existing evils, than to resort to means for their removal that may render our last state worse than the first. But while our present ecclesiastical organizations continue, let us beware of glorying in them as though they constituted the perfection of Christianity, and as though its very existence were staked upon our sectarian triumphs.

As different branches of the one holy Catholic church, let us acknowledge each other in the Lord, sympathizing with each other's trials, and rejoicing in each other's prosperity. Let us pray together, commune together, labor together, and, in the name of the Lord, set up our banner against the invasions of our common foe. If there is hatred and strife in the world, let there be within the sacred enclosures of Zion, charity and peace.

VIII. Finally, let us *commit this whole matter to God in earnest and believing prayer*. The cause of Christian union is his cause, and he will maintain and carry it forward to its ultimate consummation. It was for this the Saviour prayed on earth, and for this he now intercedes in heaven. He will not leave his work unfinished. What he has commenced, he will complete. What is impossible with man, is possible with him. All power and authority are in his hands. The hearts of all are under his entire control. There is no obstacle that hinders the accomplishment of his design but he can remove. For the divisions of Zion he can produce deep searchings of heart. He can awaken a general lamentation in her over her long cherished envyings and

strifes, and cause the hearts of her friends to flow together in the purest love and fellowship. He can level mountains, raise vallies, make crooked places straight, and rough places even, and thus prepare the way for that glorious manifestation of his grace and power, which is to issue in the subjugation of this entire world to his reign.

For this let our prayers ascend without ceasing. Already have we received answers that should inspire us with confidence and hope. The signs of the times clearly indicate that the walls of separation between evangelical denominations are destined to fall. Even now we can shake hands over them, and we trust the period is not far distant when they will be presented to us only as a mass of crumbling ruins. Controversy is evidently losing much of its asperity. The intolerance of former days is passing away. The evils of sectarianism are more generally acknowledged, and more deeply deplored. Non-essentials are less magnified. Good men are learning how they may differ and yet agree; how they may walk with each other as they walk with God. Their weapons, instead of being directed against each other, are directed against their common enemy, and the church of God is rapidly approaching the predicted era when she shall shine forth "beautiful as Tirzah, comely as Jerusalem, and terrible as an army with banners."